TODAY’S antiques when they were brand-new and for sale in a Herman furniture store about 1900.
Consumers’ Choices
A Study of Household Furnishing 1880-1920

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THE STORES "are full of such beautiful things... you can imagine me standing in front of the windows, (which are arranged differently nearly every day) until I take everything in, and then I go in and stand, and look and look, and then when I come home try to remember all I saw." So wrote Miriam Andrews to her husband in 1884. Miriam and middle-class householders like her at the turn of the century looked and looked, planned and planned, and sometimes purchased the many objects of their desires.¹

Until very recently 20th-century middle-class Americans considered themselves affluent and called themselves a nation of consumers. But that was not always so. Like war and politics, like fertility and family life, consumption has a history. At the turn of the century householders like the Andrewses stood at an important moment in that history. The stuff from Victorian households that now crams antique shops across America is surely informal evidence of the rising standard of living at the end of the 19th century. The sheer bulk and the incredible variety of tables, chairs, commodes, hall stands, desks, wardrobes, lighting devices, rugs, curtains, draperies of all kinds, not to mention the endless procession of figurines, vases, and bric-a-brac, demonstrate that middle-class householders of the era had purchasing power and used it.² Those generations furnished their houses in an expanding economy that provided them with cash, options, and advice that would have astonished their ancestors. Their newly important role as consumers has prompted historians to suggest many theories about the changing relationships of individuals to the marketplace.³ Seldom, however, have historians considered the actions and attitudes of individual consumers confronted with furnishing decisions.⁴ Familiarity with the circumstances of even a few consumers’ choices enables historians to discuss the problem in concrete terms and to shape interpretation with the aid of real examples.

From the 1840s through the 1880s, America was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Fewer and fewer families established homes as part of farmsteads where the work routine involved both husbands and wives in income-producing activities. The family unit relinquished to the factory the role of primary producer of goods. The new order created new kinds of jobs: skilled and unskilled workers on one hand, managers, petty bureaucrats, and professionals on the other.

other. As more people found work in factories and businesses, family income shifted to dependence on wage packets issued on payday. While both men and women found jobs as wage earners, men usually worked at jobs more or less steadily throughout their lives. Middle-class women, however, tended to work before marriage and then re-enter the wage-earning labor force only if family finances demanded.

Increasingly, women were identified with their primary task of child rearing. The patient, moral, and affectionate nurturance that women began to specialize in suggested that women themselves were especially patient, moral, and affectionate. They were particularly suited to make homes, those special places that demonstrated their womanly virtues. In contrast, the sphere of men became identified with the aggressive, efficient behavior required by wage-earning work in a get-ahead, go-ahead world.

Middle-class households differed in their degree of integration into the consumer economy, but both securely white-collar corporate managers and marginally white-collar clerical workers aspired to a similar sort of home life. Midwesterners of this class expected their homes to offer a moral restorative to the trials of life on the corporate work front, to safeguard the health of family members, to demonstrate persistent individuality, and to reflect economic success. The burden of creating homes that nurtured souls while maintaining health and raising status was awesome. The ordering of the household's material culture and decoration of its interior were means to accomplishing these complex ends.

By 1890 only one white married woman in 40 was working outside of the home. The average number of children born to a white woman surviving to menopause declined dramatically — from 7.04 in 1800 to 6.14 in 1840 to 4.24 in 1880 to 3.56 in 1900. Although middle-class wives were not working for wages and had fewer and fewer children, they had not become idle layabouts. Recent scholarship has argued forcefully that the tasks of homemaking were becoming so embellished and emotionalized that they required more time and attention than they had several generations earlier. By the 1880s professional expertise was available to homemakers who confronted the difficult job of deciding among, for example, the dozens of available chairs. Advice poured out of books, newspaper columns, and advertisements. Women had to become skilled consumers in order to decorate with taste for the edification and elevation of their families.

For the most part, historians have described the new consumers only generally and from a safe distance. They have hypothesized that middle-class women were frustrated by the constraints on their roles as economic producers and therefore delivered themselves docilely, even gladly, to the arbiters of taste. Women are por-
trayed as acting on the dictates of the advice-givers in a kind of unthinking, almost mechanical way. Meanwhile their husbands are drawn as passive accomplices, without tastes of their own, listening to the latest scheme with half an ear while buried behind the business sections at the breakfast table. And many historians have implied that, despite the increased possibilities for real comfort and expressiveness in homes during this era, middle-class householders paid a high personal and cultural price: resourcefulness, independence, and reasonable frugality diminished in the face of spiraling appetites for possessions.®

In the heady world of thousands of things begging to be bought, furnishing a home was a complicated and often long process. The householders had to negotiate practical problems of balancing the expectations of relatives, friends, and merchants while accommodating their own desires to their cash in hand, and then actually buying the goods. Midwesterners left substantial records of their thoughts and actions as consumers in the correspondence they carried on with friends and relatives. Their long, rambling descriptions and justifications reveal their logic, the pressures they felt, and the choices they weighed. Evidence of this kind allows historians to abandon the frustrating business of trying to infer behavior from the prescriptive literature. The Minnesota Historical Society’s archives and manuscripts division contains many collections of personal papers in which turn-of-the-century consumers reveal their material aspirations and frustrations. The small cast of midwestern householders considered in this article is by no means all whose papers are held by the society. Examining in detail the experiences of even this handful of people, however, will allow us to see some of the new consumers in action.

IN 1887 HENRY JAMES, a small-time St. Paul lawyer, took the plunge into real estate. He platted a new country suburb called Newport Park (now part of the town of Newport) on the Mississippi River about 20 miles east of St. Paul. Henry demonstrated the grand scale of his expectations for the project by constructing a house there for his family. The task of decorating and furnishing the huge, rambling, burturreted house fell to his wife, Frances, who tackled the project eagerly, developing a room-by-room scheme influenced by the newly fashionable Arts and Crafts and Mission style.® Simple furniture, plaster walls tinted by calamine, and airy curtains made of cheesecloth were part of her modest interpretation of the style. In 1888 she wrote to her sister: "Part of the house is satisfactory and part is not. Where I have stuck to my ideas through thick and thin; it is good; where I have yielded to the ideas of the workmen, not so good. I am learning by such failures the

KEEPING horses and playing tennis were part of the James family’s suburban way of life at their Newport Park home.
necessity of battling for one’s convictions. My calssroomers were [a] very hard set of men to manage so I did not always get what I wanted. 11 Frances wanted her house to reflect her taste, her carefully developed grand plan. Therefore it was essential to “manage men,” to limit their authority while using their resources. Henry, struggling mightily to make a go of his new investment, seldom appears in Frances’ detailed accounts of home furnishings and household activities.

Nearly ten years later during a second round of redecorating at the Newport house, Frances concluded a long description of color schemes for the children’s rooms — Margaret’s was pale yellow, Cornelia’s pink, and little Henry’s pale blue — with the comment, “Henry seems to like it but he considers it is driving him to the poor house.” 12 Her remark seems particularly cavalier because the Jameses were forced to give up the Newport house three years later.

In the James family, Henry tended to the business of the world, while his wife redecorated with an almost myopic intensity. While Henry’s income set the limits of Frances’ plans, he seemed unwilling or unable to enter into the real work of making furnishing decisions or executing them. Frances’ true accomplices were her mother and her sister. In letter after letter she confided to them the mysteries of the transformation she was managing. “Then we made some chairs, one I covered with dark green corduroy and it looks a handsome chair if one is not in [on] the secret. I had a cheap pine music stand that the painter ebonized for me and with a green plush curtain and some pretty bits of china on it, it looks like a handsome thing.” 13

Frances’ shower of minute decorating details bound together the sisterhood that shared in her household secrets. While Henry slipped further and further behind in the business world, Frances proudly continued to demonstrate both her taste and her ability at making something wonderful out of nothing. In her mother and sister she found an audience that could properly appreciate her skills. Her husband, on the other hand, extended only lukewarm approval, and then lost the “lovely home” that she had lavished her attention on. Frances tried to reconcile herself to the reversal in the family’s fortunes, but a note of bitterness and blame sounded when she announced the news to her sister: “Henry is eager to move as soon as we can as long as we are going. It is much easier for him I think and so we are being pushed away from this lovely home. But what we can’t afford to keep we ought not to cling to.” 14

In 1909 Henry and Frances James’s daughter Helen married Harry Sommers, a scion of St. Paul’s G. Sommers & Co. mercantile family, purveyors of wholesale notions and department store supplies. Several months later she wrote to her sister that her mother-in-law had “supplied us with everything.” Her in-laws again inter-vened when the young couple set out to search for a house. “We have been house hunting, and weary business it is. We found a perfect gem, just two blocks from home [her parents’ house in St. Paul] but could get it for only a year at a time; & while I was trying to persuade Harry to run the risk. & his family were urging the folly of such a step, someone else took the house.” Frustrated by her husband’s indecision in the face of his family’s objections, Helen complained, “Every thing is hung up until a house is found, for we cannot tell what furniture we want.” 14

Finally, the Sommerses found a house, and as they settled their belongings, they also apparently settled the question of who would arbitrate taste in their shared home. Henry grudgingly consented to adopt Helen’s definite preference for the simpler styles. “Harry & I are working every thing out together — He is lovely about every thing, & adopts my ways without a protest, candles & bare table & all.” Helen emphasized both the mutuality of their decision-making and the fact that the two of them (and not his family) were the critical actors. Establishing shared rules of taste and habits of housekeeping was part and parcel of being married. Helen’s insistence on the importance of joint decisions must not obscure her pleasure that Harry adopted her ways in everything, however. If Harry had demanded old-fashioned Victorian cloths like those that probably draped the tables in his mother’s home, Helen might not have mentioned the subject to her sister at all. Helen, in the first days of her marriage, would not imitate Frances’ acceptance of Henry’s obliviousness. The younger woman believed that mutual decision-making included frank discussions about home furnishing — but it did not mean compromise on disputed questions. Mutuality meant that both husband and wife knew and understood the decisions that she had made.

Confronted by the work required to furnish a house, Helen found herself powerfully affected by the expectations that surrounded married life. “I am amazed,” she wrote her sister, “at how absorbed I am in the decorating, because I never cared about a house & its details at all before I married.” The problem of tastefully decorating a house challenged and engaged her intelligence and imagination and demanded her time. Although Helen did not need to mend cushions or redye curtains, she did have to learn to choose wisely in the marketplace. She

11 Frances Haynes James to Helen Haynes Jaynes, February 15, 1888, in Frances Haynes James and Family Papers, MHS.
12 Frances to “Aunt Lucy,” October 18, 1896, James Papers.
13 Here and below, see Frances to Helen Jaynes, Feb. 15, 1888, August 31, 1899, James Papers.
14 Here and below, see Helen James Sommers to Cornelia James Cannon, May 17, August 23, 1909, James Papers.
HELEN SOMMERS probably planned rooms like the ones in this St. Paul home, furnished in the Mission style in 1915.

had considered her mother's housekeeping only drudgery, but established in a home and marriage of her own, Helen discovered substance and self-esteem in doing the job properly. Frances James and her daughter appear to have acted as strong-willed, knowledgeable, and avid agents of interior decoration. Several years later, Harry Sommers joked about the James family's concern with fashion. His wife wrote to her sister, "Harry always says that [convenience] comes last with our family. First we look for a fireplace, then the wallpaper; then [we agree to] take the house & find by experience the plumbing & heating conditions."膝盖

Perhaps Helen learned from her mother not only her style preferences, but also her expectations of herself as a homemaker. Their husbands assumed different degrees of involvement, but both appear to have accepted, if not encouraged, their wives' assumption of the right and responsibility to act as planners and managers of home furnishing. Not all turn-of-the-century couples organized the work of interior decoration this way.

BY THE END of the 19th century increasingly elaborate marriage customs ensured that most middle-class couples would begin married life with at least six silver teaspoons and a set of napkin rings. But wedding gifts were usually luxuries that demonstrated gift-givers' faith in the husband-to-be's ability as a good provider. Unlike the Sommorses, few couples had the luxury of resenting their in-laws' insistence on providing "everything." Most newlyweds had to use their own resources to find and furnish their living quarters.膝盖

Some husbands provided not only the financial wherewithal, but the actual goods that furnished their first married home. Stella Stevens Kincaid first laid eyes on her new home only after the wedding ceremony. Writing to her father and stepmother in rural Rapidan about the house that she had returned to in Minneapolis, Stella approved of the arrangements that her husband, J. A. Kincaid, had made. "We have quite a large house and the rooms are arranged very nicely. In the kitchen there is a sink with a drawer for bread and shelves for anything else all enclosed with doors... The furniture Mr. Kincaid has is very nice, it was all in place. The curtains all hung[,] one picture and bracket with an ornament hung also."膝盖 The bridegroom had chosen the house and provided the furniture, even exerting himself to add a decorative touch or two to Stella's obvious pleasure. Stella cared enough about the house to send her parents a full report. But in this account, she seems particularly pleased that her husband's foresight and planning relieved her of so much work. She was willing
ON his employer's letterhead Walter Post sketched his domestic arrangements in detail, from dining-table seating to the backyard clothesline.

to forego shaping the house's initial appearance if that saved the hard work of hanging curtains and pushing chairs about the rooms. Clearly her attitudes differed greatly from those of the women in the James family.

Walter Teller Post was another young husband who carried much of the burden for choosing and decorating his house after marriage. Born on a farm in Michigan, he had taken a job as a junior clerk for the Northern Pacific Railway in St. Paul. Walter disliked his job, particularly his supervisor's sharp eye for latecomers and disapproval of his frequent "sick days." Nevertheless, he felt well enough established by 1894 to marry Ulilla "Lillie" Carl of Peru, Indiana. Walter brought Lillie and a stack of wedding presents back to St. Paul to the household where he had been boarding. After only two weeks of marriage, however, he was intent on renting a home of his own. In a long letter to his father, Walter explained their situation. It was mostly a matter of money. "I am hunting for a house. Lillie and I have decided that it will be much nicer to go to housekeeping than to board and probably be cheaper or anyway as cheap. We have to pay $3.50 per month for board besides washing and street car fare. It costs us 60¢ a Sunday to go to church and S.S. (Sunday School) 40¢ for St. car fare and 20¢ for collections. We want to get a house for about $15 or $20.00 per mo." Marriage ought to mean a home of one's own. Walter and many others believed, and he single-mindedly set out to find one. In that he succeeded.

In later letters Walter recounted their step-by-step venture into housekeeping. He and Lillie went together to shop for furniture, and Walter sent his father an itemized list of their purchases and the prices they paid. He delightfully sent a sketch showing where each piece would stand in the rented house and even included stick figures of himself and Lillie sleeping cozily side by side. Walter Post seems to have been as enamored with the delightful new game of housekeeping as Helen

18 Walter Teller Post to "Father" (Charles Francis Post), July 11, 1894, in Walter Teller Post Papers, MHS. 19 See, for example, Walter to Father, August 31, October 4, November 29, 1894, Post Papers.
Sommers. Clearly, the Posts discussed how to furnish the house, but Walter’s exhaustive descriptions suggest that he, rather than Lillie, may have been the mastermind behind their modest outlay. He seemed to know as well as any female reader of advice literature that oak was all the rage and that ingrain carpets were the next best thing, if you could not afford Brussels.

Walter’s obsessive litanies of what he purchased and the prices he paid were not, however, identical to Frances James’s systematic accounts of the transformation of one room after another. Frances loaded her chronicles with detail because her artistry was revealed by the subtle touches. While she had more cash at her command than the newly wedded Posts, Frances derived her satisfaction from low-cost inventions. Walter Post, on the other hand, bought his home furnishings ready-made from the shelves of St. Paul department stores. The deals he made interested him most of all, for through the manipulation of cash and credit, Walter demonstrated to himself, to Lillie, and most of all to his father, his skills as a provider and therefore his success as a husband.

James and Miriam Andrews of Hudson, Wisconsin, revealed their domestic management in their letters to each other. In 1884, when they had been married for seven years and had one child, Miriam traveled to Detroit for a long visit with her mother. During this separation the two kept up a frequent, affectionate correspondence. In one revealing exchange, Miriam asked James to find some yarn she had left on her sewing table and to send it to her. He replied: “Now for that bit of blue yarn, I think I found it somewhere the day after you went away & put it there where you may find it when you clean house[,] but I do not think you will before as it does not appear on the surface of things. The next time you want anything just ask for the piano, dining table, chicken coop or something else that I know I can find & I shall be most happy to accom[plish] your desire.” Before satirizing his ignorance of the details of housekeeping, James had inquired of Miriam, “Where is my roll of count plaster[?]” With the confidence of one who knows her domestic arrangements inside and out, Miriam wrote back that he should look in the large box on the top shelf of the clothes press.

Miriam was clearly the expert on their home’s interior, but both husband and wife took an interest in the house and asked each other’s opinions. Miriam wanted to ship home an extension table that her mother had offered to them, but she waited to learn what her husband thought. James, meanwhile, visited the house that neighbors were constructing and related to Miriam the good advice he gave them on improving the back stairs and hall. He called on other neighbors and took a close look at their new chandeliers, in case he and Miriam might wish to replace theirs. In 1900, while visiting their daughter, Ruthie, at Rockford College in Illinois, Miriam warned James in a letter, “Don’t put on the wall paper till I come, will you?” Then she immediately added, “Without you put on that which I picked out first and be sure it’s right side up.”21 Miriam had selected the paper, but she acknowledged James’s right and ability to hang it, even without her guiding eye. With her gibe about the “right side,” she reminded him of her superior female sensibility, but Miriam’s overriding desire was to see the wallpaper up, not necessarily to hang it herself.

These middle-class couples did not allocate responsibility for home decoration according to any single pattern. Personalities and practical considerations entered into the varieties of habits they developed during marriage. Walter Post’s case suggests that lower middle-class husbands may have felt particular cause to celebrate the milestones of acquisition that marked the long climb upward. Walter’s experience demonstrates that certain individuals — especially those in marginal class and economic positions — may have been more susceptible than others to the passion to consume.22

Most remarkable, given the standard interpretation of the period, is the degree to which husbands took an active role in domestic arrangements. As part of the growing urban middle class, these couples had opportunities to spend relaxed time together at home. This may have led to more consultation on domestic affairs. With the husband’s work done by late afternoon and no animals to tend, these couples had a chance to converse about dreams and plans for their homes. Fixed hours of work allowed leisure for Walter Post to dry the dishes and for James Andrews to paste up the wallpaper. While the reorganization of production removed many women from income-producing work, it may also have allowed their husbands to share more fully in the activity of consuming at home.23

These brief accounts of the sexual division of responsibility for domestic furnishing have already raised the indelicate issue of cash. The end of the 19th century brought a general rise in the standard of living and the availability of new consumer goods of all sorts. However, there is evidence that heightened anxiety
about material well-being accompanied the increased prosperity and sometimes created conflict. Frances James, for example, laughed off her husband’s admonishments to frugality with the old joke about the poorhouse, but she was disappointed when the family was forced to move to far more modest quarters in St. Paul. Frances did not think of herself as an extravagant housekeeper. In fact, she prided herself on ingenious, low-cost solutions to interior decorating problems. A measure of the challenge was seeing how effectively she could make a barrel into a chair, how long the old rug could last in the living room, and whether she could redeye the old cheesecloth curtains. While Frances felt it her wifely duty to stretch each dollar, she also expected her husband to continue to bring the dollars home. Years afterward, Frances still daydreamed about the “old home” at Newport Park. Henry had failed to provide in the manner to which they had become accustomed, though his fling at suburban real estate development demonstrates the opportunities and the risks that awaited middle-class capitalists with a bit of cash to invest. Had he succeeded, Henry could have grandly introduced his family to a truly luxurious life.24

In contrast to the Jameses’ relatively comfortable position, Walter Post clung to the bottommost rung of the middle-class ladder. As a junior clerk in a huge corporation, he faced years of patient waiting for modest promotions. In the end, Walter too lost the home he tried to provide. Yet it was not Lillie’s extravagance that confounded their aspirations, but his. Walter found Lillie’s anxious frugality somewhat irritating. “The only fault I find with her is that she is apt to worry and look on the dark side,” he wrote. “She never was extravagant and is even more economical than I would be if I didn’t let her have her say.” Letting Lillie have her say affected particular decisions that the Posts made. For their living room, for example, they purchased only rocking chairs—“a handsome polished & carved oak $7.25, a Rattan $4.95[,] 1 upholstered $3.95.” Walter explained to his father that Lillie had insisted on the rockers as the economical solution to parlor furnishings: “that is all we will have in the parlor, until we get rich enough to have more.” While Walter allowed Lillie to draw the line on parlor furnishings, the two of them still racked up a bill of over $150.00 at Schuneman and Evans’ department store. Walter could not have managed this bill had he not asked a friend who clerked there to intercede with one of the owners. When credit was granted, he paid $100.00 down and agreed to pay the balance in 60 days.25

Foolish Walter jubilantly wrote the details to his father. Surely he could not have forgotten that he had promised to send home $10.00 a month and that he had failed in this obligation since months before his marriage. His father’s reply can be inferred from Walter’s indignant response. “Your letters were received. I see you do not understand the situation we are in so I will give you the plain facts without comment. First we only bought for our house just what we absolutely needed. . . We could not get less room, nearly all the houses in St. Paul are 7 to 9 rooms and scarcely any small houses. Rooms for housekeeping are more scarce, and cost as much proportionately. . . I hope you understand the matter now.”26

His father’s reproof hurt Walter’s pride in his ability to perform his new role of husband and provider. Worse yet, his father already had an ally under Walter’s roof. “I wanted Lillie to answer your letters because she thinks they are just about right, and she said she appreciated your advice . . . she wants to do what is for the best, and it has worried her to think that we have gone into debt at all.” Walter’s father attempted to steer his son

25 Walter to Father, July 20, 1894, March 4, 1895, Post Papers.
26 Here and two paragraphs below, see Walter to Father, July 27, August 9, 1894, January 27, May 28, June 18, 1895, and to Charlie, May 15, July 1, 1896, Post Papers. In 1896 Great Northern head James J. Hill added the Northern Pacific to his enterprises.
from the path of financial folly. He suggested that Walter follow an uncle's example and turn his wages over to his wife. Lillie, the elder Mr. Post hoped, would exercise better judgment about expenditures. Walter bristled at the suggestion. "I do not believe in Uncle Henry's plan at all ... Lillie knew before I married her what I thought about all that. She does not believe in it either. I buy all the groceries, etc." His father's pragmatic proposal offended Walter, who had no intention of abandoning his right to manage the couple's finances. He believed in an ideal of marriage in which the husband both provided money and managed it.

A year after his decision to go into housekeeping, Walter was still attempting to reassure his father. "I am just about all out of debt now," went one optimistic letter. "I have a few dollars to pay the first of July, then I will be entirely out of debt, and will begin to lay up some money, except that we have a few things that we need for the house yet to get. I tell you we have been economical." But Walter's father and wife knew best. Despite his careful monthly accountings, he failed to meet the note due at Schuneman and Evans' store. The heating bill staggered even optimistic Walter. Finally the Posts had to give up the rented house. They moved into a flat. They had a baby. Walter's carefully itemized monthly expenditures then included $3.12 for baby food. He complained about his poor wages and argued with his boss about his lack of advancement. The Northern Pacific was a beastly place to work, and "Jim Hill is the wage earners worst enemy." In September, 1896, Walter lost his job. Six months later in a brief postcard, he described an unsuccessful search for work in Indiana.

Young Walter Post proved as vulnerable as any caricature of a middle-class housewife to the enticements of consumer society. As a husband, Walter felt that he ought to be able to be a good provider and totally control his finances. He thought his anxious father and wife were simply innocent of worldly ways. Walter embraced the credit system and sneered at fear of debt as an old-fashioned, womanly weakness. A man, Walter believed, needed to trust himself enough to contract a debt. But despite his conscientious efforts to draw up budgets, shop wisely, and anticipate expenses, Walter's expectations exceeded his grasp.

APPELLARENTLY both the Jameses and the Posts considered their fund of cash and credit as a more or less common resource. Within the informal guidelines of the marriage relationship, both could draw on it for household purchases. Not all late-19th-century people viewed their money in the same way, however. In some households it mattered whose money it was that went to pay the bill. After Sarah Jane Christie married widower William J. Stevens in Rapidan in 1879, she wrote to her brother, Sandy, about her difidence in spending her husband's money. Sarah Christie Stevens had worked for many years as a schoolteacher and administrator; this period of supporting herself may have made her particularly sensitive. William Stevens had offered to pay debts that she still owed for her own schooling, but she hesitated to accept the offer. "I never can feel, Sandy, that what is his is mine — although he earnestly wishes it. He has worked hard all his life to win what he has & been saving." This example of the older single woman who married an aging widower suggests the limits of the common purse. While both husband and wife had the right to draw on common funds, the wage earner had a more natural right. Awkwardness and hesitation might attend spending "his" money, even with his blessing.

The Posts and the Jameses shared in the management and the undoing of their domestic economies. If Lillie Post put her foot down on the question of parlor chairs, she probably could have intervened in other expenditures as well, had she felt strongly enough. These limited examples suggest that it is wrong to generalize that wives had unlimited access to their husbands' wages, or even that they wished such access. Once married, couples' futures were indeed mutual. Once Frances James understood the family's true financial situation, she accepted the necessity of giving up their house. She and others like her tried to adjust their lifestyles to the real limits of household income.

Fashion cost these householders in human terms as well. Strain and tension over money matters is evident even in moderately affluent households. And beyond the amount of money was the more fundamental issue of how it ought to be spent. Not everyone subscribed to the modes of the emerging middle-class consumer culture. The stubborn standoff between Walter and his father reflects deep differences in their attitudes toward money. The elder Mr. Post was a farmer; although certainly tied into a market economy, he was probably less dependent on consumer goods than urban workers. Walter, however, deliberately distanced himself from the modest sufficiency of the family farm. He was naively eager to take on all the trappings of a consumer culture — budgets, time payments, a nice-sized debt. In letter after letter, Walter toted up his figures and explained modern life one more time. But his attempts to drag his obstinate father into a modern, middle-class understanding of money and credit failed.

Nor were finances the only issue. Family members could use fashion to tyrannize one another. And it was easy to fall short when measured against the yardstick of style.

Ilma Cale was unmarried, 37 years old, and a legal...
GoSSIP about fashion dominated the relationship between unsophisticated Artie Cale (left) and her city-slicker sister, Ilma.

Ilma, a stenographer in Minot, North Dakota, in 1917 when she penned pages and pages of fashion advice to her sister Artie. Artie, also unmarried, was four years older and lived with their mother on the family farm near Worthington, Minnesota. Ilma filled her letters with elaborate descriptions of clothing, right down to the width of each tuck on her waists. Occasionally she also wrote about the family home. "I do wish [Mother] had a nice china closet. Then it would be some satisfaction to get her nice things to put in it." In part, Ilma wanted the china closet for the opportunities it would create for her to demonstrate her affection through gifts of bric-a-brac. But a china closet was a problem, she complained, for "Our house is arranged so badly for such things. I often think it would be better to use the kitchen for a dining room and the dining room for a kitchen. Then we could fix up the dining room real fine and fancy." But even this scheme, which Ilma obviously had spent some time concocting, was thwarted by the practical reality of a farm household. "However, that would never work either because the kitchen would be so hot. It is hard to figure out any real improvement, but Mamma has always wanted a china cupboard so badly and I wish we could get one for her."28

Ilma posted the letter, got a reply, and then responded more forcefully. "I think there is a dandy place for a china closet in the dining room, there where that old bookcase is now, on the west wall between the window and the door. That is just exactly where anyone would want a nice china closet," she asserted. "You think there is no room just because there is something there now, but that could be moved and a china cabinet put there, if Mamma wanted it bad enough. She has always wanted it but I don't suppose we will ever have it." Worldly-wise Ilma was frustrated to find her great plan for improvement met by dull-witted, timid objections.

Blaming both her mother and, by implication, Artie, for their failures of imagination, for "not caring enough," she resented how they cut off her chances to demonstrate good taste.

Several months later, Artie wrote that she intended to purchase a washstand for her bedroom. Ilma greeted her sister's show of enterprise enthusiastically. "I am so glad you are going to have a wash stand. You need that so much, especially since you are always having company up there." But Ilma urged Artie to insist on a proper outfit. "And while you are about it for pity's sake buy yourself a nice pitcher and bowl and also one of those jars like mine." She moved on to her main point: "I do wish you would fix those things up as they should be. You really have no excuse for not doing it. Mamma would not object, and you know it, if you just tell her that you really want them. She always kicks about things just at first but after you get them she is as pleased as anybody. It is too absurd for you to go without things that you need so badly." Scolding, reasoning, and encouraging, Ilma was determined to pry her sister from the grip of their mother's tightfisted, old-fashioned ways. These things were "needs," not mere whims, in Ilma's world, and she was embarrased that her family refused to "fix things up as they should be."

Drawing on her own experiences living in boarding houses, Ilma patiently explained that the washstand was only the first step. Poor Artie not only needed advice on what to buy, but on how to use, display, and care for it properly. "You should just get a nice little washstand and all the things that go with it, and then provide yourself with plenty of towels as fancy as you please, and then you can be proud of the whole outfit and be in shape to do things right when you have company," wrote her anxious sister. "If I were in your place, now that you have such a nice brush and comb set I would certainly take those two awkward boxes off the dresser and then you can put one of those big dresser scarves on. You should have a white one, of course, trimmed with crochet or tatting, something that you can have washed frequently. Then keep your new brush and comb set there.

All the girls who have nice sets like that keep them on their dressers and you have no idea how pretty and neat and ornamental they look. Then if you just had a nice cedar chest and a little rocker you would be all complete."

By this rain of advice, Ilma tried to draw Artie up to and into her urban, middle-class world, a world where everyone knew that dresser scarves ought to be white, where admiring and maintaining one's pretty things consumed thought and energy, and where success was

28 Here and three paragraphs below, see Ilma Cale to Artie Cale, January 2, 10, April 15, 1917, in Artie M. Cale and Family Papers, MHS.
ILMA CALE’S ideal plan for her sister’s bedroom might have looked much like this urban 1905 boudoir, boasting a ruffled dresser scarf, fancy towels, washstand, and rockers.

achieved when company came and admired the results. Ilma’s attempt to introduce fashion into her sister’s dull routine of chores may have helped assuage guilt about leaving Artie to care for their mother. Ilma refused to stay home herself, but she generously shared the fashion wisdom of Minot.

Artie did buy the washstand; whether Ilma was able to sell her on its attendant life-style is uncertain. But Ilma’s attempts to persuade were powered by her knowledge of Artie’s troubled coexistence with their mother and her willingness to lay her own frustrations at Artie’s feet. Their complex relationship and the differences in their daily lives enabled Ilma to exercise a kind of fashion tyranny over her sister.

BOTH MEN and women shared deep concern about the appearance of their houses and worried together about how to stretch their resources to make improvements.

The decorating effects they sought to achieve and the products they longed to introduce into their homes were based on their ideas of what was fashionable and useful. It is generally assumed that these ideas arose through greater exposure to the potential delights of the consumer economy as portrayed in shop windows, advertisements, and advice books. Advertising agents and many historians considered housewives to be particularly receptive to the influence of advertising. Removed from the workplace and relegated to managing the consumption habits of the household, women had few avenues to express their taste and status except through a fashionable life-style. An analysis of advertisements for parlor organs at the end of the century suggests the degree to which promoters couched their messages in terms suited to a feminine audience. But did the artful presentation of women and parlor organs as the focus of intimate family circles induce potential consumers to buy? The advertiser’s message, the advice book’s diatribe, and the salesman’s spiel may or may not have provided the impetus for consumption. The audience might have been predisposed for other reasons altogether to heed the suggestions. From the experiences of middle-class people at the turn of the century, we can see the roots of that predisposition begin to take shape.

The lessons in new consumption habits that hit home
most forcefully were those learned firsthand. Seeing an object in use in friends' or relatives' homes and observing whether it improved their lives offered convincing evidence of its merits or its disadvantages. Miriam Andrews evaluated the admirable features of the new house of a Minneapolis friend. "Ceal's house seems almost perfect with its tiny rooms, large windows, and blinds." But her admiration was put to active and critical use; being in an airy, convenient bungalow helped her sort out her own ideas about an ideal floor plan. "I think I could plan one that would be more convenient." She also criticized the carpeted floors in her mother's apartment in Detroit, which contrasted with the bare floors of her home. Sending a message to her hired girl, Miriam wrote, "Tell Karen I miss her, but don't believe she would like to keep house as I other has to. There is no place to scrub for everything is carpeted or covered." On the same trip, Miriam also saw new products that appealed to her: "I have seen so many carpet sweepers since I have been from home, that I think one almost a necessity." Seeing firsthand was fundamental to readiness to believe in the new product. And the more carpet sweepers she encountered, the more convinced Miriam became that she too must eventually own one.31

Walter Post was also inspired to add to his wish list by the possessions of his next-door neighbor, Mrs. Jouette G. Churchman. Lillie often went next door to play the piano, and after several trips Walter was wishing "we was rich enough to own a piano of our own. It would be so much company for Lillie when she is alone." Walter was so swayed by the demonstrated pleasure the piano provided that, deep in debt though he was, he almost jumped at a wonderful opportunity — a $300.00 piano, with $10.00 down and $10.00-a-month payments. For once he resisted.32

The evidence in family correspondence suggests that women were heeding advice-givers. But according to their own testimony, the ones that they listened to were not professional drummers of the latest products but trusted friends and relatives. When they publicly credited the sources of their domestic inspiration, the housewives cited other housewives. The housekeeping hints that Frances James shared most enthusiastically with her sister were those she herself had learned from reliable friends. "Mrs. Sloan gave me such a nice idea about chairs that perhaps you can utilize in a new house. The three put together form a sofa." Friends and relatives could also bring their influence to bear by making a present of desirable objects. Lillie's mother sent the Posts a set of chenille curtains to hang in the archway of their first home. Walter and Lillie were grateful recipients: "We have the curtains hanging up and it makes it look ever so much more cozy." Her Aunt Lucy mailed Frances James a check for $50.00 for a birthday present and designated that it go for repapering the parlor.33 Both of these gifts were welcomed, for they made possible the realization of fashionable ideals shared by the givers and the receivers.

The desire for new, more fashionable furnishings was

31 Miriam to James, September 19, 1877, May 19, August 17, 1884, Andrews Papers.
32 Walter to Father, August 31, 1894, April 2, 1895, Post Papers.
33 Frances to Helen Jaynes, February 15, 1888, and to Cornelia, June 1, 1896, James Papers; Walter to Father, December 27, 1894, Post Papers.
balanced against requirements of suitability and feasibility. Even Walter Post, always eager for new acquisitions, hesitated and finally rejected the purchase of the expensive piano. Although Miriam Andrews was obviously taken with carpet sweepers, she decided that "a new broom will have to answer for a few months." She seemed to have an internal gauge for accommodating her wants to her pocketbook. Appealing new furnishings did not usually act as direct stimulus-response mechanisms. More often, like Miriam, people slowly nurtured desires until they were no longer "almost a necessity."

Nearly all of these householders acknowledged some long-range furnishing goals. The Posts started with three chairs and a table in their parlor, but Walter was buoyed by the expectation that someday "We [will] get rich enough to have more." Walter's hope to have more someday was simple compared to the complicated plans of others. Helen James Sommers' fascination with house-

34 Miriam to James, August 17, 1884, Andrews Papers.
35 Walter to Father, July 20, 1894, Post Papers; Helen Sommers to Cornelia, September 21, 1909, and Frances to Cornelia, April 23, 1896, James Papers.
37 Homer Clark to Bessie Dunsmoor, August 24, 1908, in Homer Pierce Clark and Family Papers, MHS.

THE PARLOR at Frances James's Newport house, where she waged successful battles with faded curtains and threadbare carpets

35 When at last luxuries came to be perceived as necessities, turn-of-the-century householders set out to shop for them. Selecting and purchasing took on the character of a leisure-time activity when it occurred amidst opulent or picturesque surroundings. The few instances considered below suggest some questions about the setting for consumption that deserve more attention. Some kinds of shopping dramatically demonstrated the often ironic changes in how consumers decided what they wanted and how they purchased it.

36 The wealthy elite and the middle class, for example, had rediscovered the "olden days" and the pleasures of browsing among used bric-a-brac. St. Paul businessman Homer Clark regaled his fiancée, Bessie Dunsmoor, with an account of this kind of shopping trip. "The automobiling is great with such perfect roads and interesting places to go," he wrote from Cape Cod in 1908. "How I wish I could take you on some of these trips to the quaint towns or to old furniture shops. To-day I succeeded in picking up a couple of good pieces." Poking around picturesque towns and shops, Homer reveled in the sociological spice of an old-fashioned method of shopping. He turned shopping into a tourist's adventure. His new auto allowed him the mobility to discover a new kind of shopper's paradise, far from urban department stores. With his educated eye for the newly revived "colonial," he apparently took extra pleasure in locating good pieces that the natives failed to value.

37 At the other end of the spectrum from this relaxed shopping tour was Sarah Jane Christie Stevens' complaint about her heavy burden of work. "I do no housework to speak of, but I have to see to everything & for three weeks we had two women here sewing for Stella. Also had all [the] purchasing to do. I was into Mankato at least twice a week besides directing the housework." The plain fact was that Sarah found "purchasing" (probably replenishing food and other house-
hold supplies) a lot of work and regretted the time that it required. It may not have included major new items such as furniture, but going to town or downtown for regular grocery shopping might also allow opportunities for more leisurely window shopping. Nevertheless, Frances James was delighted when her husband announced he would take over the marketing after their removal back to St. Paul. Her daughters treated their father's resolution as a joke: "how long he will continue in it is a mystery unsolved as yet." In their household the responsibility of regular shopping was not considered a treat. 38

The case of Walter and Lillie Post suggests the range of activities that falls under the heading of shopping. When seeking to furnish their rented house, the Posts together made a businesslike assault on a department store. Knowing roughly what they were after, the two of them spent an afternoon locating their exact choices, noting down the prices, and negotiating for credit. Despite the major expenditures involved, they did not search out alternatives or hesitate in their selection. They attended matter-of-factly to the problem of shopping. During the Christmas season of 1894, the Posts made a different kind of shopping trip. This one was purely for pleasure. "One evening Lillie and I went downtown to look at the different stores whose windows are dressed up for Xmas," wrote Walter. "It is a fine sight. ... We are going down again tomorrow afternoon when we will be able to get into the stores as they are not open during the evening." The displays in the department store windows were free public entertainment, and Walter and Lillie took in the seasonal event. Walter worked in a downtown office, while Lillie infrequently left the neighborhood of their house on Laurel Avenue at St. Albans Street. During the winter of 1895, Lillie went downtown only once or twice. However, when the Posts needed to select a replacement for their carpet, that was a substantial enough purchase that she paid the carfare and met Walter after work at Schuneman and Evans. The resources of the mercantile community could provide entertainment, as in the Christmas "shopping" trip, but these were not confused with the business of purchasing. 39 The invention of the department store made possible both the systematic, one-stop purchasing trips and leisurely window shopping. An enormous variety of goods was offered for sale under one roof, and changing window displays emphasized the pure pleasure of spending long hours simply looking.

The spectacle of downtown stores and shop windows filled with wonderful things excited even reasonable Miriam Andrews. Visiting Minneapolis, she wrote home about going "into a number of stores, and admiring the many pretty articles." And we have heard her awe-filled exclamations about the glories of Detroit shop windows. Even as an onlooker and not a purchaser, Miriam consumed these things, for she made them part of her world. The memories she so carefully cultivated kept alive her sense of what was possible. Without spending a penny, Miriam furnished her imagination with the latest fashions and most lovely objects. One day while rapturously consuming in her mind, Miriam was jolted into an understanding of the artifice of the great department stores. "I was at Taylor V. Wolfendensens when the gong sounded for them to close, and it was funny to see the clerks drop the goods they were holding, draw curtains, don their hats or caps, and pour out of the doors. Jen says there are over forty clerks in the building, and it seemed to me there were twice as many." 40 The mystique of the world of fashion lifted for Miriam as she watched the poorly paid clerks quickly shed their roles as arbiters of taste to resume their real lives, where they too had to measure carefully the distance between need and desire.

38 Sarah Stevens to Sandy, October 25, 1879, Christie Papers; Strasser, Never Done, 11-31; Helen James to Cornelia, December 3, 1895, James Papers.
39 Walter to Father, July 11, December 4, 1894, and to Charlie, April 7, 1895, Post Papers.
40 Miriam to James, September 19, 1877, May 20, 1884, Andrews Papers.
This limited but varied cast of characters, making decisions about their household furnishings, formed a part of the several generations that established a middle-class response to the question of fashion at the turn of the century. Not that there was a single middle-class attitude: varying economic positions and social backgrounds within that class affected responses, as did individual temperament. What all these people and the rest of their generations had in common, however, was access to professional opinions about what was currently in vogue and some prospect of achieving a fashionable home, a possibility beyond the means of working-class and poorer people.

The evidence from these correspondents lends specificity to some of the inferences historians have made about middle-class consumers; in other instances, details about behavior and attitudes suggest alternative interpretations and fill in omissions. The hard work and planning required to present a fashionable parlor within a limited budget is clear. Making a middle-class home required work, particularly from housewives. The letters also allow us, however, to recover middle-class men from their premature burial behind the business pages. Tackling the task of interior decoration seems to have helped newlyweds identify and master their new roles as husbands and wives. While implementing the plan was often left to the wives, husbands at least understood and endorsed the general schemes. In fact, the chatty comments about wished-for objects and critiques of friends' houses imply considerable ongoing, casual conversation on the subject. For some households, husbands did largely remove themselves from daily decision making. Only a crisis — and a financial one at that — brought them back into the picture. For other couples, however, domestic furnishing was a project that allowed mutual planning and work.

The availability of mass-produced goods made life easier in certain respects; it certainly opened up new options for home furnishings. But it also required that householders discipline themselves not to want everything they saw, or to get everything they wanted. Some people learned to stretch their money by inventing homemade alternatives to store-bought furnishings. Others devised long-range plans and comforted themselves with fantasies about the eventual appearance of their homes as they acquired the parts piecemeal. Expenditures for furnishings only rarely challenged the bounds set by anticipated household income. Couples generally appear to have shared information about funds and attempted to work within budgets. The social and economic position of wives not engaged in income-producing work did not necessarily lead to spendthrift behavior. Marginally middle-class people — whether men or women — may have been most susceptible to exceeding their budgets. They saw the same goods in the shops, read the same advertisements, and heeded the same admonitions to create virtuous homes as more affluent members of the middle class, yet their means to act on these urgings and enticements was limited.

The influence of professional advice-givers and advertisers is difficult to gauge. Correspondents refer to the sources of their domestic inspiration, but those they name are friends and relatives. Perhaps during the process of making their decisions, professional opinions validated what they had seen and heard firsthand from trusted friends. While undoubtedly their desires for things were stimulated by merchants, advertisers, and each other, they were not simply passive victims of salesmen's spils. Like Miriam Andrews, who stood in front of shop windows and memorized everything she saw, most of these people were willing participants, even active agents, in the manipulation of their taste by both friends and professionals. They understood that they were being encouraged to demonstrate the moral order of their homes, their personal skills and taste, and their economic status by buying things for their homes. They understood — at least in the short term — what was happening, and they chose to take part. And if participating in a consumer culture often depleted their pocketbooks and frayed their nerves, sometimes it also increased their comfort, enlarged their worlds, and excited their imaginations.

The photograph on page 188 (right) is from the Walter Teller Post Papers in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts. Pictures on page 188 (left), 190, and 192 are by photographers Harry Shepherd, Charles Affleck, and Buchan of Worthington, respectively; these and all other illustrations are from the MHS audio-visual library.

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